

# Telling stories on Etruscan pots

Tom Rasmussen

Rome was still just a muddy village when her Etruscan neighbours first began to write and represent human figures in art. In this article, Tom Rasmussen looks at some examples of Etruscan pots and the stories of Greek mythology they relay. While conclusive answers are sometimes impossible, he shows that in investigating Etruscan imagery the journey is every bit as interesting as the final, and often elusive, destination.

Although Dionysius of Halicarnassus famously described the Etruscans as ‘resembling no other nation in language or customs’, their culture and their arts did not develop in isolation. Like the Greeks, they early on adopted the practice (unusual in other parts of the ancient world) of using pottery as a vehicle for telling complex stories, delineating their figures with painting and incision and even on occasion adding explanatory captions. What is more, from the seventh century B.C., many stories of Greek mythology were becoming known to Etruscan potters and craftsmen in various media. They may have got to know about them by several means: by closely observing imported Greek pottery and other artefacts, by word of mouth through travel and trading, by Greek artists settling in Etruria and imparting knowledge to local communities. Soon Greek mythology would permeate Etruscan consciousness, at least among artists and their elite clientele. But Etruscan art is full of surprises and there are plenty of new twists in the stories told, as is illustrated in the three examples discussed here, two of which relate to Greek mythology, and one arguably so.

## An Etruscan *Argonautica*

The earliest of these pots is of bucchero, a distinctive shiny black fabric which quickly became the standard fine pottery throughout Etruria. It is a jug or olpe of about 630 B.C. that was found in a chamber-tomb, or tumulus, at San Paolo to the south of the city of Caere (modern Cerveteri). The figure decoration is unusual (for this early date) in being carried out in relief with incised details. The shape of the vessel – which is much taller than it is wide, with a high single handle – is derived from Corinth, and there are recognisable characters here,

too, that are Greek. Inscriptions make this clear; so we have *metaia* (Etruscan for Medea), and further round there is *taitale* (Daedalus). Questions immediately spring to mind: why should these figures be included in the same frieze, and why show Daedalus winged?

The second question is perhaps the easier to answer. The wings may be there to draw attention to one of the inventions Daedalus was best known for (human flight), but he stands here as rather an isolated figure. The rest of the frieze can be connected with the story of Jason and the Argonauts. Medea is positioned in front of a large pot from which a male figure emerges; this may be Aeson, Jason’s father whom – according to one version of the myth – Medea magically rejuvenated. Or, in accordance with another version, it may even be Jason himself. The boxing duo may allude to the games held by the Argonauts on the island of Lemnos. A seemingly enigmatic element is the long cloth held aloft which is also given an Etruscan label (*kanna*).

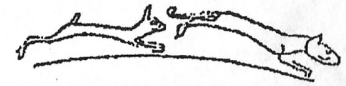
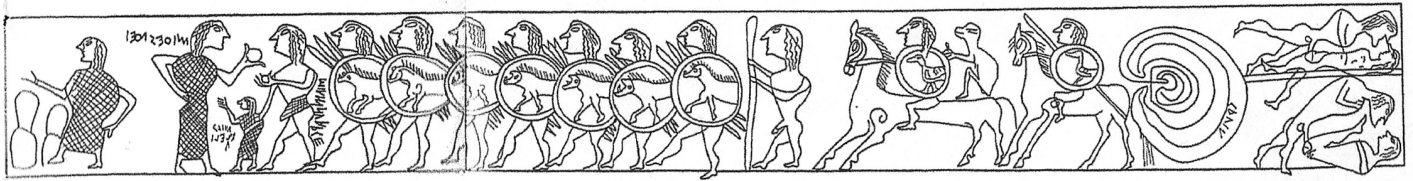
Should we wrestle further to try to extract precise meanings from this ensemble? It may be enough that Medea is here doing her magic, and that Daedalus is present because he is in the same category as she: a wonder-worker; while the process of rejuvenation may especially suit the funerary context of the vessel. But it is irresistible to try to accommodate the long cloth within the narrative as well. It would seem to be too big for the golden fleece (the object of Jason’s quest), as well as for the robe or cloak which we are told by Pindar in his fourth Pythian ode was awarded to the winner of the Argonauts’ games on Lemnos. But a recent discussion has focused on the word itself and its possible later derivatives: *kanna* – Gk. *kannabis* – Lat. *cannabis*, the underlying meaning being ‘hemp’.

Clothes can be made from hemp but so can sails, and the strength of the material and the sheer size of the piece of cloth here (requiring six men to carry it) suggest the latter. If we also bear in mind that a strong sail for its dangerous voyage was needed by the Argo above all else, and that, according to the ancient travel-writer Pausanias, Daedalus could count the sail for ships among his inventions, we may arrive at a more or less complete solution. Although the choice of these particular episodes, and the emphasis given to Daedalus, are not easy to explain, what we have in front of us is a sort of Etruscan *Argonautica*, showing a remarkably intricate knowledge of Greek mythology for the seventh century B.C.

## A Troy of sorts?

Still in the latter part of the seventh century, but at its very end, comes our second example: a jug or oinochoe found in a necropolis at Tragliatella to the east of Caere. It is very much in the style of pottery painted at Corinth, though just about all that remains of the painted figure friezes are their incised details. The drawing has a crude vigour, and the artist has tried to cram in as much as he could – hence the boat squeezed in vertically in the upper register. Here too there are inscriptions, which name the family group on the left of the long frieze. They look to be mother, father, and daughter. The parents carry what are probably eggs of different sizes, which in Etruscan funerary imagery often have connotations of death and the afterlife. The little daughter – Velavesna – has a gesture similar to the lady on the extreme left, and I take it they are the same person. The daughter, now grown up, is mourning at the tomb markers of her deceased parents.

Opinion is divided whether the rest of the imagery expands on this Etruscan family history, or has to do with scenes from Greek mythology. If the former, then the upper frieze may show the meeting of husband and wife earlier in their lives. It has been suggested he may have been a dealer in livestock. But a maze-like design in the main frieze may take us into the realms of mythology. It is labelled *truia* which can support different interpreta-



Drawing of figure friezes from Tragliatella oinochoe.  
Courtesy of Tom Rasmussen. [Adapted from Martelli, *La ceramica degli etruschi* (1987)]

tions. The Etruscan word can certainly refer to 'Troy' and so we may be looking at the city itself from above in a kind of bird's-eye view. A Trojan theme that comes to mind is the story of Paris, eloping with Helen in the upper scene, and in her embrace in the lovemaking episodes – incidentally the earliest realistic scenes of lovemaking in western imagery by a couple of generations. He is then perhaps to be included among those marching out to defend their city.

It has also been speculated that *truia* might mean 'maze' and that the protagonists could be Theseus and Ariadne – a story that features an escape from a labyrinth, a journey by sea, as well as the performance of a crane dance (which might account for the birds). Others prefer *truia* to mean 'turning' or a turning formation that may allude to the Troy Game described by Vergil in his epic poem the *Aeneid*: a stylized equestrian ceremony still celebrated in Vergil's own day. According to this view, the riders have performed a routine as part of the funeral games in honour of the deceased for whom the pot was made. A recently published ninth-century graffito scratched on the wall of a building at Gordion in Anatolia, showing an exactly similar maze-like design, is of considerable interest. But it does not solve the issue. Geographically it is rather remote from Crete and its labyrinth, but a reference to Troy might have greater relevance in terms of its location and date. What is interesting again, though, is the fact that a Greek myth has been integrated into an Etruscan narrative context.

### Hercules and the Minotaur

If the narrative of the *truia* vase is difficult to pin down, a more obvious reference to Greek mythology is displayed by an early-fifth-century amphora in the Louvre, attributed to the evocatively named Dancing Satyrs Painter. Although found apparently at Caere it was almost certainly made at Vulci, a city further to the north and the leading centre for Etruscan black-figure production. One side shows a combat over a fallen warrior. But this is eclipsed by the other, more interesting side where a wonderfully elegant Minotaur is opposed by a threatening Hercules, lion-skin over his head and with a proudly displayed six-pack.

Such a confrontation does not exist, of course, in the standard Greek myth, an anomaly that has in the past worried some scholars. But in ancient Italy the Minotaur was a powerful figure and emblem in its own right and not necessarily attached to the Theseus legend, while Hercules (Etruscan *herkle*) was a hero/god capable of overcoming all monsters that could be dreamed up and the Etruscans were not hesitant in showing this.

### The malleability of myth

The archaeological context of these vessels should be borne in mind. The Louvre vase is likely to have been found in a tomb, and the other two certainly were; and probably one of these, the *truia* vase, was made expressly for burial. Some of the deeper meanings which they may

have conveyed in their funerary surroundings may elude us, but we should not be too surprised at the variations from the 'standard' myths that are displayed. In any case, by the time the Minotaur vase was painted Greek mythology had been in circulation in Italy for so long that the Etruscans may not have thought of it, or much of it, as Greek any more; it was open to them, therefore, to treat it with a certain freedom and creative licence.

Modern European culture often displays a rather similar attitude. So, in the mid-nineteenth-century world of Offenbach's operettas, Zeus, disguised as a fly, can chase after Eurydice, who – contrary to her usual faithfulness – would much rather spend her time with Pluto in the underworld than with her husband Orpheus. In present-day television, the series *Atlantis* can playfully jumble together Jason, Hercules, Ariadne, Medusa, and even the mathematician Pythagoras, as contemporaries and weave them into the same story. This is no disrespect to Greek mythological heroes (Pythagoras too has his mythological aspects), and if it is a misunderstanding it is deliberately so. The Greeks and their heroes, today as in ancient Etruria, are part of life's fabric, subject to no rules but to the imaginations of those who would instruct and entertain.

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